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Anna Pavlova by Valerian Svetloff (1931): Body and Archetype: A few thoughts on Dance Historiography

Sorgel, Sabine

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tel: +44 1970 62 2400
email: is@aber.ac.uk

Source: *Anna Pavlova* by Valerian Svetloff (1931)

Body and Archetype: A few thoughts on Dance Historiography

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body.

(Foucault 1977: 148)

Archetypes, with their ties to both subject and object, unfold simultaneously in both radical specificity and subjectivity (the intrapsychic, symbolic dimension), and in numerous embodied avenues of experience and expression, as living mythologems.

(Salman 2008:63).

When it comes to history writing, dance is probably in an even worse position than theatre, if one considers its ephemerality. There is not much evidence of Anna Pavlova's actual dancing, yet images, news paper clippings, autobiographical accounts on her personality abound. In an interview available on youtube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cn_K41P0B1w) Frederick Ashton comments how Pavlova was actually not even that much of a ballet dancer in terms of her limited vocabulary and technique and yet he confirms that no one like her personified what is oftentimes perceived of as "the essence" of dance. Pavlova was a phenomenon of her time and continues to

fascinate. The item from the collection I picked is a little book written by Valerian Svetloff, a Russian ballet critic of early 20th century, and presents us, to use the author's words, with a 'choreographic portrait.' It is an intriguing term for him to use, because it reverberates with more recent notions in dance scholarship. Thus Susan Foster (1995) suggests that as dance scholars we need to choreograph history by tracing potentialities of movement and the body in each given historical document. Svetloff's book now choreographs words and photographs by which it evokes a complex visual-imagistic narrative of Pavlova's dance in the reader's mind. Meandering along the textual and pictorial information given, my scholarly eye became interested in several research aspects of this document:

- Pavlova as archetypal ballerina, in particular her stylization as the 'Dying Swan'
- Pavlova as an early 20th century transnational celebrity aligning Russia, England and the world in geopolitically interesting ways
- Pavlova's 'It'-factor (Roach 2004) "[I]t is not what Pavlova does, but how she does it that places her far above all others" as an inversion of what was to become Pina Bausch's famous dictum: "not interested in how people move, but what moves them"

- The notion of her dance as expressive thought: “dancing has turned into poetry” (11) and dance as a “state of mind” (12) in a somewhat contradictory juxtaposition to the
- Fetishization of her female body (“physical gifts”): “Her long, admirably proportioned arms [...] hands are full of life and expression, her legs remarkably well modelled, and her ankles as slender as they are strong” (19)
- Orientalism (21)
- An allegory of the classic and the modern (28): what is Pavlova’s role as a precursor of dance theatre and modern dance?

Each of these aspects involves a research project of its own, which is the reason I consider this little book such a treasure, as it opens up various perspectives on this renowned artist. Since I will not have the time to go into any depth with the outlined research questions today though, I have decided to spend just a few more thoughts on the choreography of text and image.

Choreography as a term defines most generally ‘the art of dancing’ as well as ‘the art of writing dances on paper’ which is also more technically referred to as notation (Foster 2009:98). As such choreography may involve words, abstract symbols or images which provide in some sense or another, a ‘plan or

orchestration of bodies in motion' (Foster 2009: 98). While the dance itself belongs to the present and resists such written fixation, choreography appears as the attempt to ascribe permanence to the transitory fleetingness of the art form and thus refers to the past. In that respect, Svetloff's 'choreographic portrait' presents Pavlova as an enigmatic paradox, where we recognize her by an over-familiarization with the iconic photographs, and yet knowledge of her appears to forever escape us. There is no recognizable face underneath the theatrical masks she presents, nor can we find the Barthian *punctum* in any one of the photographs in this book I suspect.

Much has been written on the ballerina as the victim of the male gaze, or the phallic nature of the point shoe, and yet Pavlova's power appears in the clever subversion of such facile tagging. She was known for improvising her entrances and exits on stage, so no one could ever predict where she was coming from, or would disappear to. The popular diva makes herself publicly available, and yet her image remains an empty shell, for us to project upon. In that sense, she is herself an embodiment of 'choreography' as her image orchestrates the audience's unfulfilled desires and provides an archetypal structure for culturally invested discourses on 'femininity' and 'dance'. Again, the juxtaposition of textual narrative and photographic image makes this choreographic strategy

evident, as the dance critic's authorial voice contributes to the enigmatic disguise rather than to unravel the mystery of her art.

Thus, Pavlova's 'choreographic portrait' presents us with an allegory in Benjamin's sense of history as a ruin, since it does not give away anything we could ascribe to the affective quality of her dance (Benjamin 1998). Choreography appears as a discursive rather than performative practice that in our given document largely excludes the living quality of actual movement. Hence, there is a distinct feeling of sadness attached to this book and probably all archival material, as the historian senses the irretrievable loss of performance. All that choreography ever documents is the trace of the vanishing dancer upon the horizon, for we will no longer see Pavlova dance.

Pavlova's 'Dying Swan' hence survives in our imaginary where its archetypal embodiment epitomizes an eroticism of death which blends imaginal structures from a cultural genealogy that allegorically aligns the Dionysian principle of the dancing maenads of Greek antiquity with ballet's Apollonian homage to the classically disciplined body's victory of form and grace. There is an uncanny premonition of hubris and downfall in each pointed up-rise, increased by the repetition of those movement motifs, when we look at the existing film footage of her dance. The allegorical image bears also traces of a romanticism that signifies freedom of expression, a pathos that is affective in the sense that it

communicates an energetic investment beyond the confines of the individual referred to by Svetloff as 'soul' or 'impulse' of life itself and thus becomes foundational for the timelessness of Pavlova's allegorical style.

Dance historiography is thus confined to the ruins of documentation and any further analysis of this and other archival choreographic documents will hence depend on how each historian will choreograph her own text upon this resource. As outlined above, there are ample opportunities to assess the genealogy of Pavlova's early modern allegories of self and subjectivity in the many socio-political discourses of her time, and yet aesthetically there is also the notion of dance's haunting non-significance of being-in-the-moment, the fleetingness of instantaneous expression that creates meaning as dance-thought and cannot be captured but only experienced in the here and now. Dance history will inevitably be evoked as a ruinous state of melancholy and irretrievable loss, and yet provides the pleasure to seek new meaning for ourselves as we choreograph archival sources on the written page.

Sabine Sorgel

ITC Seminar: Dance/Choreography

Anna Pavlova by Valerian Svetloff





<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qE1FR-Dj5K4>